



## Winter greetings from the farm!

It's time for a winter check-in from the farm. The calendar may say February but it sure does feel more like about April around here. This is great weather for getting farm projects started but lousy weather for playing in the snow. We'd like to get one more good playing-snow before things warm up for good.

Now, let me apologize in advance for the length of this letter. Grab a cup of coffee or a beer and sit down for a 5-minute read--there has been (and will be) a lot going on at Bramble Hollow:

### JACK'S EGGS

Thanks to all of you who have supported Jack in his first year of business ownership by purchasing eggs from him! We are all learning a lot about the cost of producing eggs as we work together to help Jack develop his business and this has been a good exercise in closely examining one of our farm products from beginning to end. I'm happy to report that Jack took some of his earnings from his first year and treated himself by buying some of the coolest laser tag guns we've ever seen. As longer days approach Jack will have plenty of eggs and he plans to add to his flock of layers this year.



### AN UPDATE ON BRAMBLE HOLLOW FARM MEAT CHICKENS

Usually when writing this letter we get to introduce you to some new offering that we are trying at the farm. This year, we are taking one of our offerings off our list. This year we are going to start phasing Cornish Cross meat chickens out of our list of offerings. We have many reasons for doing so and I'd like to share them with you:

#### *1. High mortality and its effect on our well-being*

The Cornish Cross chicken is the industrial breed of chicken raised for grocery stores and most restaurants. The breed was developed to put on weight quickly for fast turn-around, to have white feathers that allow the carcass to pick cleanly and to live inside in climate-controlled conditions. When we raise these animals outside we are giving them a much better life than their counterparts living in confinement. At our farm their feed quality is better, they have access to fresh grass and grubs, can feel natural sunlight and fresh air. But the bottom line is that these chickens were developed to be inside a climate-controlled house and outdoor temperatures here in the Blue Ridge are anything but controlled. We feel this exposure to the natural environment causes the birds to be overly stressed.

In 2016 we experienced significant losses from one of our early Cornish Cross batches on pasture in early Spring. Such losses certainly affect our bottom line as a successful farm but more importantly, we run our farm as a family business. Most days all four of us move the chicken pens together in the morning. Our children experience farm life and we like the natural way they are learning about life and death. Occasional death is one thing but daily exposure to dead chickens is a hard thing to have in your life. I don't want my children to get used to this. It's hard to pull the bodies of dead chickens from the pens first thing in the morning and then go about your day unaffected. It messes with your vibe! The mortality rates of Freedom Rangers

and Heritage Breed meat birds is much lower and many times we experience zero percent losses with these breeds. We have never had a zero percent loss with Cornish Cross. I don't want my children to have to experience these large losses anymore.

### *2. Overall health*

The stress that causes these birds to succumb to low- and high- range temperatures makes the surviving birds less healthy, in our opinion. Some Cornish Cross chickens die late in life--even the day before processing--due to heart attacks because the rapid growth of their large breasts and legs outpaces the growth of the heart and other organs.

### *3. Inability to reproduce on-farm*

Because these birds are hybrids, they cannot mate together and produce a true-offspring. To continue raising these birds we are at the mercy of large commercial hatcheries that control the genetics of these birds. They hold the patent to the parent stock, and hatch and ship day-old chicks. Were the USDA or the USPS to decide that day-old chicks could not be shipped through the mail we could not provide you with chicken for your table if we solely relied on Cornish Cross.

***For these reasons and a few others we are going to offer you the Freedom Ranger chicken this year as your staple chicken as well as the heritage breed birds I'll tell you about shortly. We've offered Freedom Rangers for years and here is a little information about them to refresh your memory.***

Freedom Ranger birds were derived from an American and European heritage breed that was developed in the early 1960s to meet the high standards of the French Label Rouge Free Range program. They are better foragers than the Cornish Cross, garnering more of their diet from forage and natural protein sources as they peck and hunt through the pasture. Most importantly, we raise these chickens with the same management and care as the Cornish Cross and rarely do we have dead birds in our Freedom Ranger pens. It's an exception not a regular occurrence as with the Cornish Cross.

As I look back at the data over the last few years our Freedom Rangers have historically weighed more than the Cornish Cross at processing and the range of weights has been closer and higher meaning those of you who love the bigger 5-6 pound birds will still be able to have a great selection. In fact, if you are looking for smaller 2.5- 3.5 pound fryers, I will encourage you to try our own strain of heritage breed New Hampshire Reds as the Freedom Rangers hardly ever weigh less than 4 pounds.

Because they take 3 weeks longer to reach processing weight and consume more feed, Freedom Rangers cost more to produce than Cornish Cross. This year we will be offering Freedom Rangers to you for a lower price than we have in the past. Last year Cornish Cross were offered at \$4.50 per pound and Freedom Rangers at \$5.25 per pound. While we all transition we will offer them to you all at \$4.90 per pound to closely split the difference in price with you. This means you will be paying only \$1.80 more for a 4.5 pound bird that we feel is healthier for you and is most definitely healthier for us to raise. You can think of that \$1.80 per bird difference as a contribution to our family's Mental Health Fund as switching breeds with us will make us happier farmers!

***That brings us to an update on the heritage breed meat chickens and what we are doing to keep our chicken experience entirely on-farm from breeding to hatching to growing to processing to eating!***

## **OUR FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH A TRUE BREEDING PROGRAM**

Last year we started the first steps in a breeding program here at the farm. With help from the Sustainable Poultry Network we were able to select a group of about 35 New Hampshire Red breeders. In past years the heritage breed chickens we've raised for meat came from large hatcheries that selected for egg-laying traits in their heritage breed lines. Large hatcheries care about producing a hen that can lay many eggs a year and through breeding select for these traits with no concern for large meaty birds. In fact, with no market for male chicks (as males aren't egg layers) most large hatcheries euthanize day-old male chicks.

As a consequence the heritage breed chicks we got from them did not produce large table carcasses. When we became acquainted with the Sustainable Poultry Network two years ago and began buying chicks from them we began to see an increase in our weights at processing. We also were able to stop participating in a system that killed day-old male chicks.



Through years of record keeping and careful selection we hope to raise a strain of this heritage breed that will produce a nice plump table bird and still be a proficient egg layer. As I sit typing this letter I can hear the first new chicks that just today emerged from 100 eggs we have set. Marren is thrilled to have the basement continually producing baby chicks, all of which she names Fuzzy or Fluffy. These will be the first batch of heritage breed meat birds for Local Roots Restaurant and your tables in July of this year.



About half the eggs we hatch will be males, which we will raise out for meat and the other half will be females which we will keep for layers. The breeding program will get new breeders from what we hatch as well. If we get to the point that we have too many layers we will be able to sell these locally-hatched heritage breed hens to those wanting to start a backyard flock of egg layers.

We will be offering New Hampshire Red heritage breed meat birds this year. Weighing in at around 3.0-4.0 pounds, these birds deserve a space on your table for special occasions AND everyday eating and we hope you will come to love them as we have.

## BRENT ON THE VABF Board of Directors

Brent and I were fortunate to have a few days in January to get away to The Homestead resort in Hot Springs for the annual Virginia Association for Biological Farming conference. We always get energized after attending sessions at this conference and meeting other producers and consumers sharing our values and goals. ***This year we were especially honored as Brent was elected to serve on the Board of Directors for the organization, and he now serves as Vice President.*** If you are a VABF member, talk to Brent about ways to get involved, improve the organization and promote biological farming. If you are not a member, join now!

## LOCAL FARMING CONNECTIONS

This year we want to continue to connect you with other local farms that we support and buy from for our family. Look for their products at Chicken Pick-Up Days:

**Wingstem Farm** of Montvale, growers of shiitake and other edible mushrooms  
**Goose Creek Gardens** of Montvale, new neighbors who offer an herb and flower CSA  
**Chapel Creek Farm** of Bedford County, apples and apple cider  
**Cove Branch Farm** of New Castle: GMO-free sweet corn by the bushel  
**Mattie's Mountain Mud:** fair-trade locally-roasted coffees and other goodies

Thanks for taking the time to read this letter. Though we are changing a few things this year, our commitment to raising nutrient-dense, clean food remains the same. As always, our chickens and pigs are supplemented with GMO-free grain milled at Sunrise Farms in Stuarts Draft, Virginia.

We struggled with how much to tell you about our new plans and why we don't want to raise Cornish Cross anymore. Brent and I decided that being candid about our struggles with both our own production issues and our participation in the machine that is industrial agriculture was the best plan. As like-minded friends you share many of our values and we see you as more than customers.

***Please know that by supporting our farm and the changes we are making you are supporting small businesses, vibrant local agriculture and most importantly, we think, the community in which we have all chosen to live.***

Looking forward to a great 2017,

Brent, Anna and family.

